

***I can't shake the stranger out of you***

An exhibition by Casey Carsel. Response written by Nurit Chinn.

I find myself at the mouth of a maze.

Counterintuitively perhaps: that delicate, red maze, etched on the quilt's corner. And yet there are mazes everywhere: borders and boundaries, grids and geometries, exits and portals.

I've always been scared of mazes—I have that power: to turn soft rooms into black holes. That's a Jewish gift: to contort dream into nightmare. To see danger where it's hiding; to invent it where it's not. A maze: a terror, an entrapment, a garden, a night, a secret, a joy, a game. That red maze of the artist's: carefully rendered on blue fabric, a cousin to the brick wall that covers most of the quilt's composition with its edge. There, behind the wall: another game of hide and seek. Of corners and foregrounds. The artist hints at the terror, the glory, the possibility of the unseen. Is it forbidden or private? Might it be beautiful? Must it be visible?

A maze is a site of play, like the chessboard, at the borders of which figures contort their muscular bodies toward the other, like dancers, like lovers. Black and white. Life and Death. As grand as it is familiar, as much a pastime as it is a series of sacrifices.

The maze and the chessboard echo a certain Britishness, though I am a British writer. Perhaps it is the habit of the person, to see pieces of herself everywhere. Or is that the habit of the British, to find pieces of the self that have been lodged into place, like stakes hammered into the mud. Yet I'm a British Jew, I get confused about what pieces I've inherited and to which I've surrendered. A British Jew negotiates her separateness, then apologises. Christchurch, "more English than the English," also a home to Jews, perennially expelled and arriving within the hoards of British colonisers. They speak the language of the excluded, the absent, the hidden, the aspirational, the assimilated.



I reach the center of the maze, where I find a bird.

Birds: wanderers. High enough above to cast observations. Hooked between past and future. The pearled goose of the exceptional; the

rooster in the weeds, who asks across its body: *"What died for this garden to grow?"*

A maze crafts a path with wild vines, and I follow it. Artificial and overgrown. Logic like a digestive tract. Like the taut rope emerging from the mouth of the small orange bird; a mouth open, holding. The mouth agape to welcome and expel. The mouth agape to grip, its edges raw but satisfied. To leave the digestive system is to exit through a certain mouth or certain gap. To leave the digestive system is an act of release, an act of expulsion, an act of privacy, mystery, eroticism, of violence. To merge the inside with the out. To stretch. To empty. (Us Jews are good at the works of digestion – so good we're bad).

*I can't shake the stranger out of you* is the meticulous, mysterious study of gaps, of holes, of chasms; of boundaries and perimeters – within systems, architectures, symbols, homes.

It is the work of uncovering presence in absence: history, reference, beauty, and surprise. Repulsion in the beauty. Fear in the laughter. And inside out again.



We trust that the maze has an exit, but if we can't find it, we spiral. We spiral towards the center, where that hidden magnet is – pulling everything together. A whirlpool, a black hole, a vortex: an architecture of intimacies. We lean away; we are sucked in regardless.

After all, a spiral is a cycle that is either collapsed or eternal.

The artist shows it is both. The artist illuminates our collapsed, eternal longings. The Jew who goes home and is nowhere. The garden grown from bones. That lengthy aquamarine finger, both admonishing and beckoning. The cupboard empty of torah scrolls, instead the soil for vines.

What do we place in the void, the artist asks, and there is no answer. Yet now the void is contoured, visible.

The work turns the hole so you can see its edge. The work says the hole has a perimeter, though translucent. The work illuminates the edge. From certain angles, we see it: that the hole holds light.